

## Daniel Albright: On "Canto IX"

The next Cantos - VIII-XI - turn from myth to history: from Acoetes to the landlocked Odysseus of fifteenth-century Rimini, the warlord Sigismundo Malatesta, ever harassed, ever trying to construct his private Ithaca, the Tempio. These four Cantos are the most coherent, chronologically intelligible sequence in the whole Cantos, until the Chinese dynastic Cantos LII-LXI. And yet they are as technically advanced as any of their predecessors.

Pound had been long experimenting with personae that were not (so to speak) whole-body personae, personae in which the poet was completely hidden by the mask: Pound was fascinated by personae in the form of half-masks, in which the poet only partly hid himself. In the year that he began *The Cantos*, 1915, Pound wrote "Near Perigord," in which the poet dramatizes the difficulty of finding out enough about the belligerent troubadour Bertrams de Born in order to adopt him as a persona: we see Pound gathering puzzling documents, bemusing himself with possible constructions of Bertrams' physical appearance, pretending for a moment to speak in Bertrams' voice, but at last watching the whole charade fall apart into "a broken bundle of mirrors" (P, 1926, 157). Sigismundo is Pound's most far-reaching experiment with the half-mask: Pound prints documents, sometimes in translation, concerning Sigismundo's life (a poem he wrote to his mistress Isotta; instructions concerning his generous patronage of the arts; a gracious letter he received from his son; a description of the bonfire at St. Peter's basilica, in which an effigy of Sigismundo was burnt, following his excommunication by Pope Pius II); but Pound is reluctant to feign Sigismundo's voice, and prefers to let "Sidge" speak for himself.

. . . .

Much of the narrative is told in the third person, but Pound occasionally slips into the first person plural, as if the poet had enlisted in Malatesta's army:

And we beat the papishes and fought

them back through the tents

And he came up to the dyke again

And fought through the dyke-gate

And it went on from dawn to sunset

And we broke them and took their baggage (XI/48)

The repeated *And* suggests the soldiers' inexorable advance. This technique, in which the poet retains a half-anonymous, tentative presence on the fringes of the poem, would persist in *The Cantos*. . . .

But there is a moment in the Malatesta Cantos, toward the end of Sigismundo's life, when the

poet presents himself in a slightly different manner:

and came back with no pep in him

And we sit here. I have sat here

for forty thousand years (XI/50)

This might be the exaggeration of a footsoldier, whose hard life might seem forty thousand years long; but it also might be the voice of the poet of Canto IV, conjuring up the shadows of the fifteenth century in an old arena; and it also might be the voice of Eliot's Tiresias, who sat by Thebes below the wall, and walked among the lowest of the dead. Sometimes Pound's voice is focused through a mask; but sometimes it blurs, grows hollow with echoes, as if a whole Grand Canyon had opened around it. As Sigismundo's dreams crumble, as it becomes clear that his syncretic temple, in which the gods of pagan antiquity would be worshiped along with the Christian god, will never be finished, the poet starts to disengage himself from Sigismundo, to range for new ghosts. . . .

Sigismundo was a contemporary of Villon, on a higher social plane, but equally engaged with sex, religion, and death. Instead of excerpts from testamentary poetry, Pound provides for his "score" the documents that constitute Sigismundo's testament - his generosity to painters such as Piero della Francesca, his consultation with Alberti on the architecture of the unfinished (but still preserved) Tempio. Instead of cello and bassoon, Pound provides cues that establish the right timbre, the right roughening of voice: the poet's own macho zest for combat ("we had smashed at Piombino and driven Out" - X/46) or explicit judgments about Sigismundo's accomplishment, as when Pound visits what is left of the Tempio and notes, "The filigree hiding the gothic,/with a touch rhetoric in the whole" (IX/41). Perhaps this will serve as a judgment on The Cantos as well as on the Tempio that seems a stone metaphor for The Cantos.

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